

CALIFORNIA HISTORY NUGGET



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THE FARALLON ISLANDS

Millions Have Wondered About Them; Few Have Visited Them

Not so long ago there was a California boy who felt sure that he was going to be an artist when he grew up. Some day he would try to make the ocean with all its color and mystery seem real on canvas. For hours and hours the boy would stand on a hill near his home south of San Francisco, gazing out over the Pacific.

On clear days the small, rugged islands beyond the Golden Gate would catch his eyes and hold his fancy back from flying to China and the South Seas. The Farallon Islands!

To the boy the name meant that the islands were far and alone. In his mind they were exactly that—far from everything else in the world, alone and strange. When someone told him later the real derivation of the name, the boy was disappointed. When he grew older he discovered that other small boys had been mistaken in the same way.

The name Farallon is a Spanish nautical word meaning "cliff or small, pointed island in the sea." From the days of the Manila galleons the Spaniards called the islands "Los Farallones." Sometimes they were spoken of as "Los Frayles" (The Friars).

Southeast Farallon, largest of the islands, contains about a hundred acres. It rises from the sea thirty-two miles west of the Golden Gate. The others jab their small rocky heads out of the Pacific in a line roughly twelve miles long and half a mile wide at its widest.

These jagged little rocks seem like the last outposts of the continent, holding the last thin line against the ocean. And that is almost exactly what they are. They stand at the extreme western edge of the great continental plateau, and west of them the ocean drops off suddenly to immense depths.

Charles Nordhoff, describing the islands in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* for April, 1874, wrote: "The Middle Farallon is a single rock, from fifty to sixty yards in diameter, and twenty or thirty feet above the water. It lies two and a half miles northwest by west from the lighthouse. The North Farallon consists in fact of four pyramid rocks, whose highest peak, in the center of the group, is one hundred and sixty feet high; the southern rock of the four is twenty feet high. The four have a diameter of 160, 185, 125, and 35 yards respectively, and the most northern of the islets bears north 64° west from the Farallon light, six and three-fifths miles distant"

On Southeast Farallon there is a cave. In the old days many stories were told of treasure hidden there in the darkness or buried



After a Painting by Julian Rix

THE FARALLON ISLANDS

near the mouth. But stories are easier to tell than treasure is to find. The first American men who made their cautious way into the cave did find something, though. They came suddenly upon the skeleton of a woman. They buried the bones in the hillside, but no one ever learned how they came to be in that strange place.

Not only small boys gazing dreamily out to sea, but great sailors embarked on perilous adventures have seen the islands and wondered about them. Forty-one years before the *Mayflower* landed at Plymouth Rock, Captain Francis Drake, bound as some people said for the Strait of Anián, visited the Farallones.

Drake called them the Islands of Saint James. He reported that they had "plentiful and great store of seals and birds." From one of the islands Drake and his men took "such provision as might competently serve our turne for awhile."

Cermenho saw the Farallones as he sailed his small boat from the wreck of the *San Agustín*. Viscaino saw them. Father Crespi saw them from the shore with Portolá and from the sea with Ayala, sailing in the *San Carlos*, first ship to enter San Francisco Bay.

The Russians, however, were the first to make practical use of the islands. They not only settled on the California mainland at Fort Ross and Bodega Bay, but they placed fur gatherers on the Farallones. Gathering fur on these islands 120 years ago was not an easy life. In several ways the occupation was less than perfect. Zackhar Chichinoff,

who was there in 1819, described a few of his experiences quietly enough:

"A schooner took us down to the islands but we had to cruise around for over a week before we could make a landing. We had a few planks with us and some canvas, and with that scanty material and some sea-lion skins we built huts for shelter. We had a little drift wood and used to burn the fat of sea lions and seals for cooking purposes.

"When we landed we had about 120 pounds of flour and ten or twelve pounds of tea and, as we were nine persons, the provisions did not last long and we were soon reduced to sea lion, seal, and fish. The water was very bad, also, being taken from hollow places in the rocks where it stood all the year round. We had no firearms; the sea lions were killed with clubs or spears. The sea lion meat was salted down in barrels and boxes which we had brought with us, and in holes in the rocks.

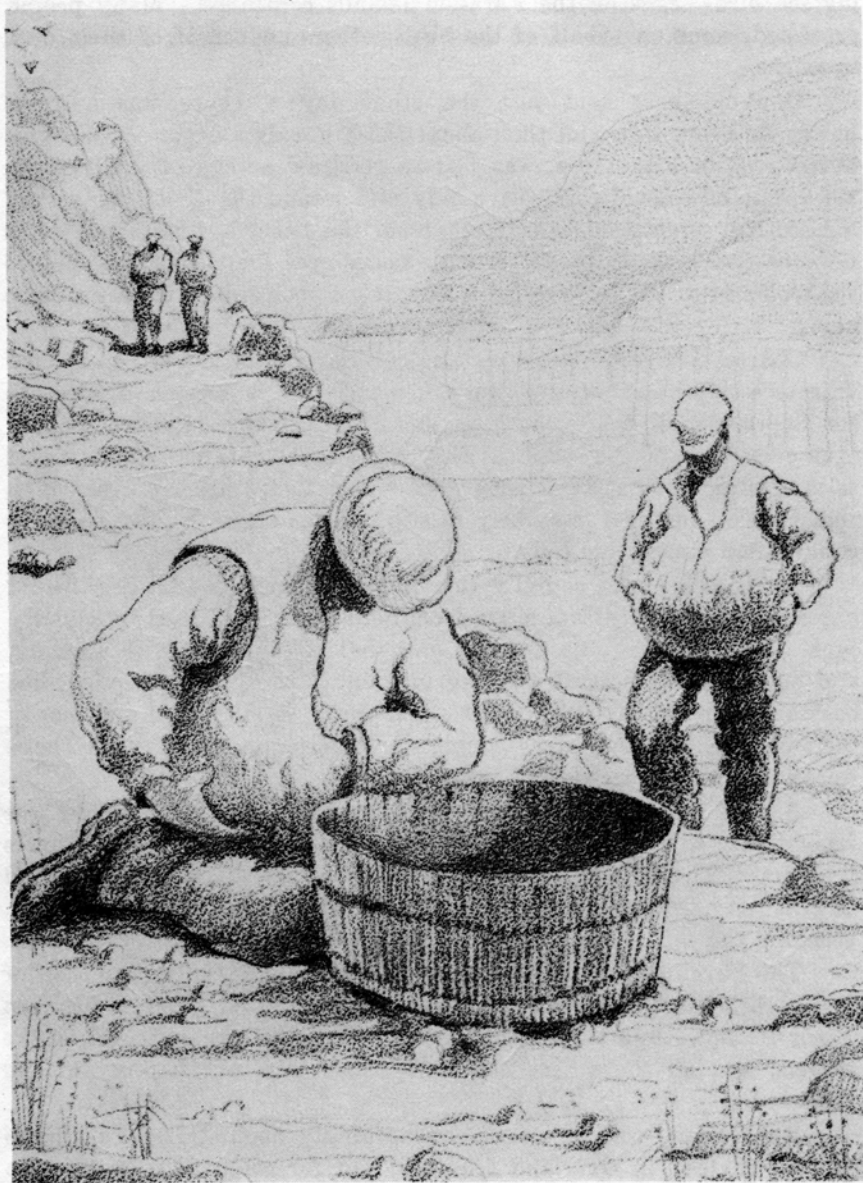
"Once only, about six months after we had landed on the islands, one of the company's brigs came and took away the salted meat and a lot of the fur-seal skins, and then went on her way, leaving about 100 pounds of flour, a few pounds of tea and some salt. About a month afterward the scurvy broke out among us and in a short time all were sick except myself. My father and two others were all that kept at work and they were growing weaker every day. Two of the Aleuts died a month after the disease broke out. All the next winter we passed there in great misery and when the spring came the men were too weak to kill sea lions, and all we could do was to crawl around the cliffs, and gather some sea-birds eggs and suck them raw."

The Russians did their work thoroughly in spite of discomforts. They took 150,000 fur seals from the islands in three brief seasons. The Russian American Fur Company made profitable arrangements with those great sea rovers, the New England traders. Russians secured the furs, Americans carried them to Canton, sold them to the Chinese and brought back goods which the Russians needed. It was a cruel and wasteful business, with far-reaching results. However, the story of the destruction of fur seal and sea otter is not simply a story of the Farallones, but of the whole coast.

Unfriendly to man, the Farallones have always been kind to birds. They might well be called bird islands. All day long the air about them is alive with the graceful movement of wings. For the most part the feathered inhabitants are sea birds. The few land birds found there are likely to be strangers resting for a day or two.

When men from all the world rushed to the California diggings in the early 1850's they brought with them hearty appetites for eggs,

but very few hens. Smart people thought that "sea hens," especially gulls and murre, might serve just as well. Out to the Farallones they went, and soon the gathering of eggs was a well-organized business. In 1853 one boat carried a thousand dozen eggs to San Francisco, to



Drawn by Yvonne Robinson

THE EGG PICKERS

be sold at a dollar a dozen. As it took but two days to gather the thousand dozen, egg-hunting must have paid nearly as well as gold-hunting.

Even after Californians settled down to engage in callings less romantic and more secure than gravel-washing, the business of gathering sea birds' eggs on the Farallon Islands continued. Many people protested, some on behalf of the birds, others on behalf of their own stomachs.

One old-timer said just the other day: "There was a great howdy-do every now and then about those Farallon eggs. Probably a murre egg, or a gull egg, was just as good as the egg of a Plymouth Rock, but how could a sensitive lady understand that? If you served a beautiful angel-food cake fresh from the baker's, ten to one some nervous crank would regard it with snaky eyes for a long time before she took a bite. Oh, we argued a lot. It's a good thing Petaluma came along."

Charles S. Greene, after visiting the Farallones in 1892, published an interesting description of the egg pickers in the *Overland Monthly* for September of that year. At that time fifteen men were picking eggs every day of the season. They wore shoes with canvas tops and soles of braided rope. The rope wore longer than leather on the rough sharp rocks, and was less likely to slip. A man with rope-soled shoes could climb almost like a fly.

The trousers were bound with cords at the ankle so that they would not catch on rocks. Coats made from flour sacks were used to hold the eggs. The coats were quite loose, gathered at the waist with a string, and cut with a V-shaped opening in front. The pickers would come back to their hidden large baskets, get down on all fours and empty their blouses as if they were pouring potatoes from a sack. The shells were thick, but an occasional egg broke.

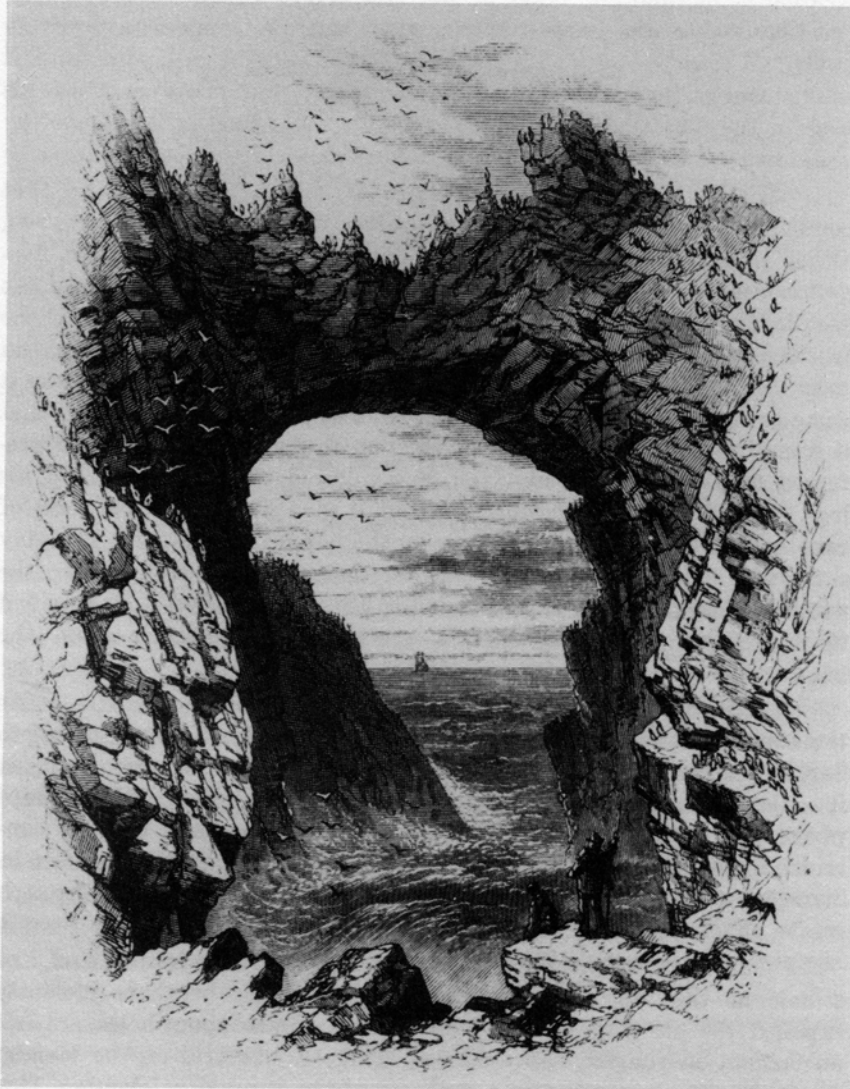
As the men darted swiftly on their search the birds would rise from where their eggs lay, without nests, on the rocks. The murrees flew first. The thieving gulls, greedy and not so afraid of men, tried to beat the hunters to the murrees' eggs. Often the gulls won the race, reaching the eggs and breaking them before the men could reach them.

The Farallones are now a bird sanctuary under the jurisdiction of the Lighthouse Service. No visitors are permitted to land between April 15 and August 15. The murrees, the gulls, the cormorants, the petrels, and all the others may fight their lives out happily among themselves.

Mr. Greene, who wrote so entertainingly about "Los Farallones de los Frayles" in *Overland Monthly*, had for companion on his trip to the islands an artist named Ernest Peixotto. Probably no artist in the world could have been more interested in the Farallones, for Mr.

Peixotto, years before, was the very boy who thought the islands were "far and alone," and longed to paint them.

Greene, the writer, and Peixotto, the artist, visited Southeast Farallon just too late to meet one of its most interesting inhabitants, Jerry. Mr. Greene writes: "And here is the place to speak of Jerry. We did not see him, he had been dead some weeks; but we saw his



From an Engraving by E. A. Abbey

ARCH ROCK AT WEST END, SOUTHEAST FARALLON

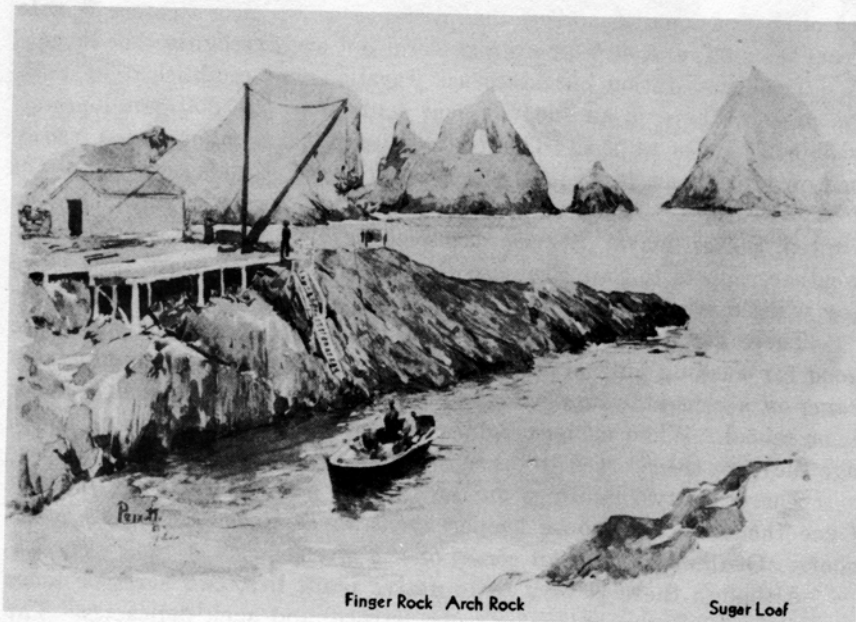
grave, and the sweet perfume of his life of good deeds still lingers in the spot he labored in faithfully and long.

"Jerry was an ass, but if it be supposed that that is a term that implies stupidity, an indignant denial will come from all that knew him. He was by far the oldest inhabitant of the island, and he filled the place of oldest inhabitant to perfection. He knew more about the weather signs than any other person (the term seems quite proper) on the island—was the best barometer they had, the keepers say. From twelve to twenty-four hours before a storm Jerry would announce it unmistakably, by showing great excitement, and standing with his nose in the direction from which the storm was coming, and snorting violently. . . .

"His duties were to act as locomotive on the little railroad that connects the North Landing with the keeper's houses and the siren. Other tasks were to pack the oil up the hill to the light, two five-gallon cans on each side of his pack saddle, and to walk around the windlass that hauls coal and heavy articles up on the platform of the North Landing. This last job he did not approve of, and he learned to know the whistle of the government steamer, *Madroño*, and when it came bringing supplies Jerry would hide so securely in the rocks that it sometimes took a large part of the day to find him. He vastly preferred to play with the children, and allowed them to swarm up his legs, or pull his tail, without an attempt at a kick. He was fond of cake, and used to come up and paw on the porch to beg for it. One day a visiting friend made some cookies, and set them down near the window to cool. When she returned to look at them, she was horrified to find them gone, and Jerry's ears just disappearing from the window."

Nordhoff gave a lively description of the famous fog whistle. "As the Farallones lie in the track of vessels coming from the westward to San Francisco," he wrote, "their light is one of the most important, as it is also one of the most powerful on our Western coast; and it is supplemented by a *fog whistle* which is one of the most curious contrivances of this kind in the world. It is a huge trumpet, six inches in diameter at its smaller end, and blown by the rush of the air through a cave or passage connecting with the ocean.

"One of the numerous caves worn into the rocks by the surf had a hole at the top, through which the incoming breakers violently expelled the air they carried before them. Such spout-holes are not uncommon on rugged, rocky coasts. There are several on the Mendocino coast, and a number on the shores of the Sandwich Islands. This one, however, has been utilized by the ingenuity of man. The mouth-piece of the trumpet or fog whistle is fixed against the aperture in the



From a Painting by Ernest Peixotto, 1892

THE NORTH LANDING

Sugar Loaf is 200 feet high, and yet the Coast Pilot says the spray sometimes goes clean over it

rock, and the breaker, dashing in with venomous spite, or the huge bulging wave which would dash a ship to pieces and drown her crew in a single effort, now blows the fog whistle and warns the mariner off. The sound produced has been heard at a distance of seven or eight miles. It has a peculiar effect, because it has no regular period; depending upon the irregular coming in of the waves, and upon their similarly irregular force, it is blown somewhat as an idle boy would blow his penny trumpet. . . .

"The life of the keepers of the Farallon light is singularly lonely and monotonous. Their house is built somewhat under the shelter of the rocks, but they live in what to a landsman would seem a perpetual storm; the ocean roars in their ears day and night; the boom of the surf is their constant and only music; the wild scream of the sea birds, the howl of the sea lions, the whistle and shriek of the gale, the dull threatening thunder of the vast breakers, are the dreary and desolate sounds which lull them to sleep at night, and assail their ears when they awake. In the winter months even their supply vessel, which for the most part is their only connection with the world, is sometimes unable to make a landing for weeks at a time. Chance visitors they

see only occasionally, and at that distance at which a steamer is safe from the surf, and at which a girl could not even recognize her lover."

The light station on Southeast Farallon was established in 1855. At present there is an incandescent lantern of 280,000 candlepower, visible 23 miles at sea. The Lighthouse Service maintains a radio-beacon station on the island, furnishing radio signals continually in foggy weather. There is also an important geodetic station. The United States Naval Service occupies several buildings and sends weather reports to San Francisco headquarters twice every day. The fog whistle was discontinued long ago.

There are no roads on the island. The few springs of water are good for washing but not for drinking. Drinking water is caught from rains on a cement watershed and stored in two large cisterns. There is no school. When modern lighthouse workers have children of school age they are transferred to other locations.

There are two landings on the islands, both likely to be difficult. Once the chief lighthouse keeper spent three weeks trying to reach shore. Ordinarily the mail comes once a week.

Although there is very little native plant life, two acres or more are given to raising onions, carrots, lettuce, and such delicacies. The birds and rabbits think very highly of this little garden, hard-won from shallow soil.

But the residents are not so sad as one might suppose. They have radios, which bring them news of the world. The fishing is good. And the rabbits which eat the lettuce are themselves good to eat. Above all, however, the residents are doing a very important work. They help to protect the lives of the thousands who come and go, month by month, through the Golden Gate.